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ABSTRACT

This module provides theoretical aspects of listening comprehension and practical teaching suggestions. Learning activities are designed to achieve the following objectives: (a) explain briefly a theory of the speech process; (b) define redundancy, semantic encoding, phonic patterning, and phonological decoding; (c) enumerate and explain the stages of development of listening comprehension; and (d) design a teaching activity for improving listening comprehension skills of Puerto Rican Spanish-speakers. A theoretical overview of listening comprehension that describes the process of speech is presented. Learning activities are outlined, and provisions for pre- and post-assessment of mastery of terminal objectives are included. (PD)

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MODULAR SEQUENCE:
ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE
METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

TTP 001.08 LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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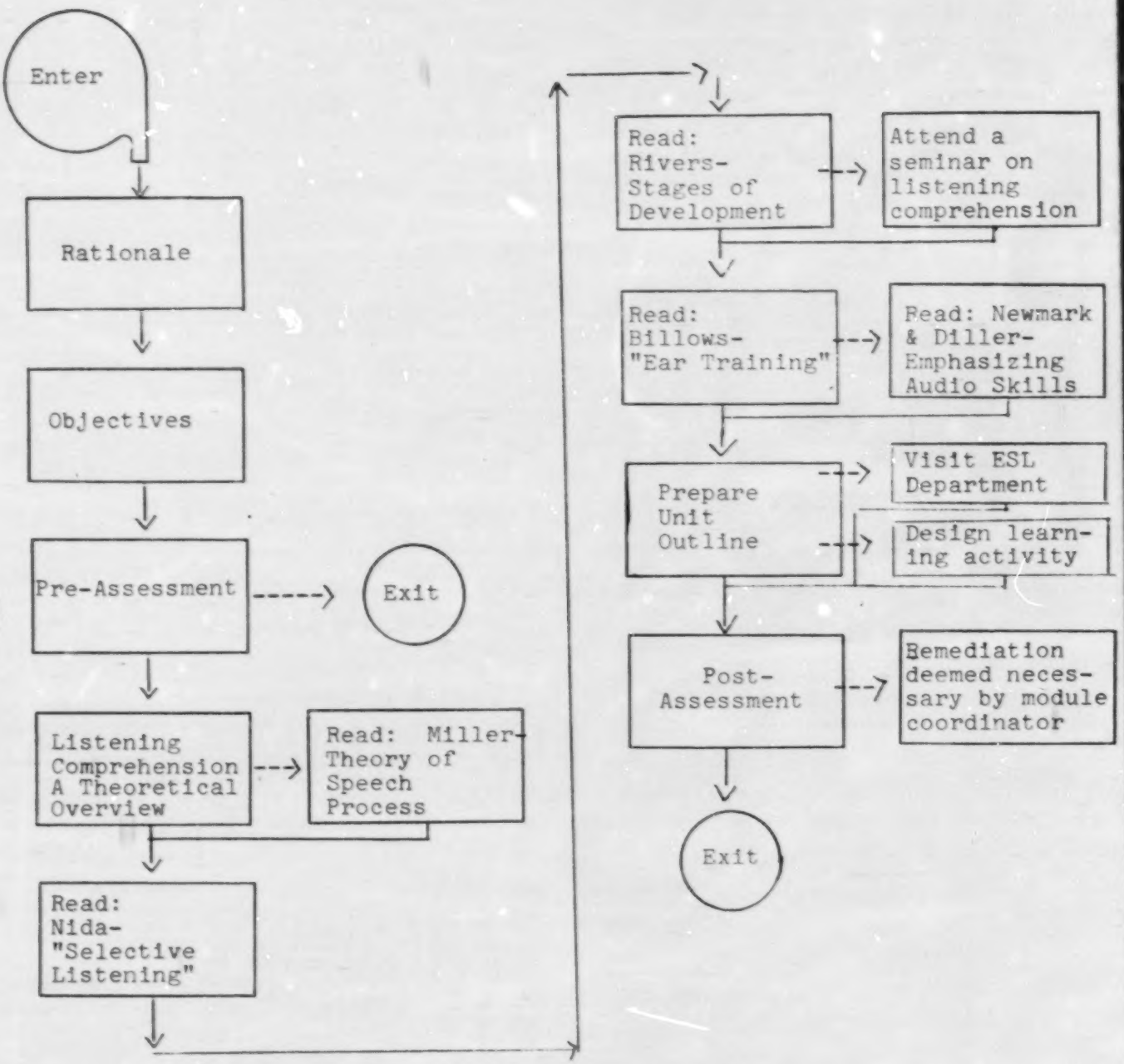
LISTENING COMPREHENSION



RATIONALE

The teaching of second-languages has in recent years stressed the aim of language as communication. The traditional grammar approach to language teaching with its memorization of rules and direct translation has been overruled for a more realistic and functional study of language.

In oral language communication, there is always more than one person involved. In order for language to function effectively, what the speaker says must be understood by the listener. Many non-native speaking students in the public school system find themselves in very tense and uncomfortable situations, not understanding what is being said to them and around them. These students are unable to advantageously use their speaking skills since they cannot effectively decode the message transmitted to them by the native speakers of their second language.

Teaching and/or remediating the comprehension of oral language should be of primary importance to a language teacher involved with linguistically different children. This unit of work will provide the participant with the theoretical aspects of listening comprehension and practical teaching suggestions.

OBJECTIVES

Given a series of activities on listening comprehension, the participant will be able to:

-explain briefly a theory of the speech process.

-define the following language terms:

- -redundancy
- -semantic encoding
- -phonic patterning
- -phonological decoding

-enumerate and explain the stages of development of listening comprehension.

-design a teaching activity for improving listening comprehension skills of Puerto Rican Spanish-speakers.

PRE-ASSESSMENT

To assess your prior mastery of the terminal objectives of this unit of work, complete the following exercise. Your performance on this assessment will determine which learning tasks you are to perform.

Directions: Answer the following questions according to the directions noted in each:

I. Explain briefly the following terms in relation to the speech process:

A. Semantic encoding

B. Phonological decoding

C. Grammatical decoding

II. Outline the "speech chain."

III. "In order to reduce to manageable proportions the amount of information in any one sound sequence, each language developed a certain amount of redundancy."[1]
Explain redundancy.

IV. "The student learning a foreign or second language passes through several stages in the comprehension of speech."[2] Enumerate the stages.

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[1]Rivers, Wilga, Teaching Foreign Language Skills, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 137.

[2]Ibid, p. 140.

LISTENING COMPREHENSION: A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

Engineering research in the field of telephonic and telegraphic communication involving the analysis of the process undergone by a message passed from emitter to receiver is highly significant for the second-language teacher who is concerned with improving the listening comprehension skills of his students. Our primary focus in utilizing this research and the corresponding linguistic adaptations is to discover how two people can communicate through speech.

In order for the speech process to take place, we must assume that there are at least two persons involved in a speaker-listener situation. We must also assume that the speaker says something to the listener who is able to understand what the speaker said. This is the process of communication via oral language or speech.

As the process of speech ("the speech chain") goes on, several steps must take place at different levels. The speaker has some "meaning," concept, or idea to communicate to the listener. The speaker tries to place this "meaning" into the language code available to him. This is the process of semantic encoding, the first step in the process of encoding the message. Monika Kehoe says, "... We can think of every language as a vast sieve with thousands of semantic slots in it. Any idea which we want to express in that language first has to be put through this sieve."[1] Every language has its own special set of semantic

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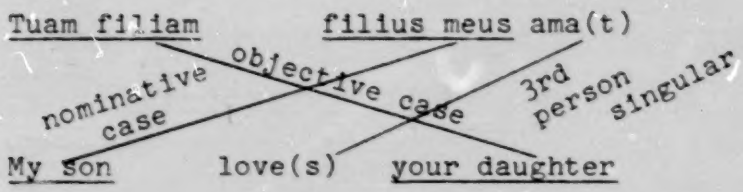
[1] Kehoe, Monika, ed, Applied Linguistics (New York: Collier-McMillan, 1968), p.10.

slots or units of meaning; if there is a need to express a new concept, the language provides a new slot or word.

The next step is arranging the proper semantic units in the particular order required by the language used in the speech situation. Thus, according to his message, the English speaker must say: "boy hits ball" or "ball hits boy"; the syntactic order of English determines the meaning of the message. In Latin, however, the syntactic order is irrelevant in determining meaning; this is the function of inflectional endings:



Once the speaker has formed a string of units of meaning or morphemes (Ex: ball + hit + boy), he has to encode them for sound. This is done by converting the morphemes into phonological or sound units. Once the speaker has completed this phonological encoding, his brain must send instructions to the speech organs telling them what movements to make. The speech organs, in turn, perform the proper series of movements as they are stimulated through the motor nerves. The message is sent as a consecutive string of separate instructions for each phoneme (unit of sound), but at an extraordinary speed. If the message is the word /paen/, the speech organs will get instructions to

produce the sounds in the order of the phonemes, for example, first /p/, then /ae/, and finally /n/. This does not mean that the speech organs move jerkly and instantaneously to produce one sound and then change their position jerkly to get ready for the other sound. It has been proved through the use of X rays that while the speech organs are moving into position to produce one sound, they are already anticipating part of the position for the next sound. There is a continuum in the production of the sounds, a smooth blending rather than a drastic change in the position of the speech organs.

Audible sound waves are produced by the speech organs as they set the air molecules in vibration in the process of articulation. When sound waves reach the listener's eardrum, he receives the message whether he desires it or not. He can decode it, however, only if he knows the language code used by the speaker. As the message reaches the listener's eardrum, the process of decoding starts in his brain: phonological decoding, grammatical decoding and semantic decoding.

We mentioned earlier that the speaker uses the language code available to him for expressing the meaning he wishes to transmit to the listener. This code is what many linguists call phonic patterning.[1] Each language has a distinctive phonic patterning, permitting the speaker to express meaning within its limitations. This patterning is formed by sound sequences acceptable to the speech community, degrees of loudness, levels

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[1]Rivers, Wilga, Teaching Foreign-Language Skills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 136.

of pitch, and lengths of pause. This is internalized by the child at an early stage, but the second-language learner requires much training to acquire it. Once the student learns to recognize groupings of these clues, he is able to decode a message in the given language.

Since the organism has a limited capacity for the reception of information, we can only absorb a certain amount at a given time. Thus, language provides a variety of aids in reducing the amount of information in a given utterance. These aids are what is know as redundancy in a language. Without redundancy, it would be impossible to absorb all the information at the normal speech rate.

Redundancy is found at different levels: -phonological, morphological and syntactical- which reinforce each other in the conveying of meaning. This is necessary since we do not maintain, in a normal speech situation, an intense degree of concentration throughout every statement made by the speaker. It may happen that at the beginning of an utterance we did not pay the necessary attention, but by means of the redundancy in the language, we get what we might have otherwise lost. Thus, a Spanish sentence beginning with a verb-form such as "Sabe"[1] (Does he know) signals a question to be answered with a yes or no. At the same time, the rising and falling pitch pattern signals the sentence as a question. If the listener did not

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[1]Verb form may also indicate "Do you know..."

pay attention to the first clue, he has another aid available to help him decipher the message correctly.

In addition to the aids to meaning provided by the sound sequences, our bodies convey further redundant elements by their movements and facial expressions. These non-verbal elements are known as kinesics and paralanguage, and they vary among speech communities. Since these elements are important in conveying a message, they should also be taken into consideration by the language teacher.

One problem which interferes with the transmission of the oral message and affects listening comprehension is the occurrence of irrelevant sound. This noise may negatively affect the communication by reducing particular phonemic distinctions and deteriorating the message. Wilga Rivers says,[1]

> The language learner is then faced with several problems: the identification of patterns and their combinations in the somewhat mutilated message which he has received, the reconstruction of the defective sections according to probabilities of occurrence, and the organization of these patterns in a meaningful way. The organization which results will depend on his previous experience with words, syntactical groupings, situational context, and the cultural elements reflected in the foreign-language usage. His degree of familiarity with these elements will determine what he selects from the stream of sound, which is providing information at a rate which makes it impossible for him to assimilate it totally.

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[1]Rivers, Wilga, Teaching Foreign-Language Skills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 139.

Psycholinguists say that if a nonsense sequence of sounds is presented to a listener at a very low level of audibility, he will organize these sounds into a conventional or intelligible sequence; providing of course, that this sequence of sounds is uttered with the pitch levels and intonation patterns of a language familiar to the listener.[1]

Noise affects the listening comprehension of the language learner who might misinterpret unfamiliar sequences of sounds in the second language. As the learner acquires experience with the language, he builds up probabilities of occurrence of certain sequences of sounds. In other words, the learner expects to find a certain message in a specific linguistic context. That is why so many language experts say that we tend to hear what we expect to hear.

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[1]Rivers, Wilga, Teaching Foreign-Language Skills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 140.

I. Required:

A. Read:

Eugene A. Nida, "Selective Listening," in Harold B. Allen and Russell N. Campbell, Teaching English as a Second Language, Second Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), pp. 145-152

Activity: Plan three (3) sample listening activities, (one each for phonetic features, vocabulary and grammar), as outlined by Nida, for a specific group of Puerto Rican Spanish-speakers. Consider native language interference in developing the activities.

B. Read:

Wilga M. Rivers, "Listening Comprehension," in Kenneth Croft, Readings on English as a Second Language, (Cambridge: Winthrop Publishers, Inc., 1972), pp. 87-99.

Activity: Enumerate the stages of development of listening comprehension.

C. Read:

F.L. Billows, "Ear Training," The Techniques of Language Teaching, (London: Longmans, 1961), pp. 32-54.

Activity: Discuss Billows' suggested techniques for ear training.

D. Activity: Based on the ideas you have read in the above sources, prepare an outline for a specific curriculum unit aimed at improving listening comprehension in the following case:

> Alberto, who arrived from Puerto Rico two weeks ago, is a sixth grader in a mainland school. Although he received some formal training in English while studying in Puerto

Rico, he is unable to communicate orally in English. He can read and write simple English sentences, but when he is listening to the teacher or his English-speaking peers, Alberto is tense and confused. His teacher has diagnosed Alberto's problem as one of identifying the phonetic features as produced by a native English-speaker.

II. Optional

A. Read:

G.A. Miller. Language & Communication. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1951), chaps. 1-5 passim.

(Provides the theoretical explanations of the acoustic characteristics of speech, the concept of information as applied to language, and the conditions of emission and reception for a message.)

B. Attend a seminar on listening comprehension as scheduled by your module coordinator.

C. Read:

Gerald Newmark and Edward Diller, "Emphasizing the Audio in Audio-Lingual Approach," in Harold B. Allen and Russell N. Campbell, Teaching English as a Second Language, Second Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), pp. 98-101.

D. Visit the English as a Second Language Department at your local Board of Education. Discuss with the ESL Supervisor approaches used in the public schools to develop listening comprehension in second-language learning.

E. Design your own learning activity.

POST-ASSESSMENT

Directions: Complete the following and present them to your module coordinator for evaulation.

I. Prepare a diagram illustrating the speech process as communication. Define all terms used.

II. Write a short essay explaining the redundant elements of a language. Include a minimum of three examples.

III. List the stages of listening comprehension a second-language learner passes through.

IV. Design a teaching activity for improving the listening comprehension of a specific group of Puerto Rican Spanish speakers.

Competency will be certified when your module coordinator has ascertained that the submitted post-assessment is of acceptable quality.

Remediation: Alternate learning activities are available on a contractual basis with the module coordinator.

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1. Allen, Harold B. and Russell N. Campbell. Teaching English as a Second Language. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1972.

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